

SMALL SHOP, BIG RESULTS: STREAMLINING SYSTEMS WITH
LEAN

ABOUT OOWEE INC. Oowee Products manufactures premium leather beverage accessories for breweries and distillers across the United States. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, Oowee incorporated in 2009, the same year Asheville won the moniker “Beer City USA.” The company’s hand-stitched beverage sleeves and hand-rivited coasters grew in popularity as the craft brewery market boomed. Now, Oowee has three employees and uses Lean tools to reduce waste and streamline operations.

THE CHALLENGE. Although founder Gabriel Hargett was not necessarily worried about Oowee lacking efficiency, he agreed to participate in an IES-led Lean workshop as part of an initiative designed to reach very small manufacturers (those with fewer than 20 employees). Hargett quickly realized the benefits of Lean, especially when it came to maximizing material resources and minimizing waste. Initially, Oowee purchased leather solely as remnants from lace and boot manufacturers, but as demand for the products grew, the company began purchasing whole blocks of hides in custom runs and colors. The odd-shaped leather scraps that are left after a pattern is cut are either thrown away, saved for reuse, or resold; the more that can be reused, the higher the profit.

MEP CENTER'S ROLE. Benefiting from waste reduction is typical after applying Lean, but Oowee has seen more unorthodox outcomes, too. The company partnered with the Autism Society of America, employing adults on the autism spectrum to produce its intricately stitched beverage sleeves. Lean’s emphasis on work standardization and visual controls—including diagramming, color coding, and materials organization—have been invaluable as reference materials for the six autistic adults working in Oowee’s sewing room. For instance, Hargett reviewed a particularly tricky lacing pattern with one worker, pointing to each step of the instructional diagram at the station. The worker quickly got the hang of it, and successfully recreated the pattern on the leather sleeve that he was assembling.

Oowee moved into a new space that is 700 square feet larger than the last one, and Hargett hired three new employees: two production workers and one salesperson. “In two years, I hope that we’re even busier, that we have more autistic adults working,” he says. As Oowee’s staff effortlessly turns out piece after piece of beautiful branded leather for a 14,000-piece order, it’s clear that they’ve turned the corner.

“Lean has helped us to know how to scale up—a couple of years ago, we would turn down orders because we just couldn’t meet deadlines for very large orders. We have become much more efficient.”

-Gabriel Hargett, Founder

RESULTS



Hired **3** new employees



Improved scalability



Unique outcomes by
employing autistic adults

CONTACT US



1005 Capability Drive
Research III Bldg., Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27606



(919)513-6119



www.ncmep.org

